FAMILY LIFE IN EARLY VICTORIAN PROSE FICTION

BY

DAVID KINCAID BRUNER

A.B., Washington University, 1933
A.M., Washington University, 1934

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN
ENGLISH IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF
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In this present study of family life in Early Victorian prose fiction, I have attempted to discover what the novelists, reviewers, and essayists in England from the passage of the Reform Bill to the outbreak of the Crimean War had to say about the family as an English institution—what they considered its virtues, and what criticisms they made of it. My method has been to describe the typical or conventional family as it was represented in works of prose fiction, to classify the criticisms made of it, and to evaluate those criticisms in the light of the Early Victorian reputation of the novel as a literary form. I have not tried to determine what Early Victorian family life may have been actually, but rather what it was according to the writers of the day.

I have endeavored to be judicious in the selecting of materials for study. Of the more important novelists, Dickens, Thackeray, Disraeli, Bulwer-Lytton, Mrs. Gaskell, Charles Kingsley, Anthony Trollope, and the three Brontës, I have studied all works written within and about the Early Victorian period in England. Of the lesser writers, Mrs. Gore, Lady Blessington, Lady Bulwer, Mrs. Ellis, Mary Howitt, Charlotte Yonge, Grace Aguilar, Mrs. Crowe, Frances Trollope, Theodore Hook, and Shirley Brooks, I have studied representative novels. By reading reviews in periodicals, I have also informed myself about the subject matter and treatment of many other novels by these and other writers. I have limited my reading of reviews to those appearing in the *Athenaeum*, the *North British Review*, the *Edinburgh Review*, the *Quarterly Review*, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, *Fraser's Magazine*, and the *New Monthly Magazine;* I have limited my reading of treatises and essays to a few contemporary popular works appearing either singly or in the aforementioned magazines.

The works of prose fiction under consideration illustrate many aspects of Early Victorian family life; they concern

themselves with many kinds of families, and with families belonging to many different social groups. And yet they also define the typical or conventional family; that is to say, they indicate what structure and philosophy were common to all families and were approved by Society.

The typical family was founded upon two beliefs, so widely accepted that any contraversion of them was indeed a rarity. The first belief was religious: each person born into this world was a soul accountable to God, and it was the duty of his parents to make him acceptable on earth to Society, which was God-ordained, and in heaven to God. The second belief was that by divine ordinance man had been created a being superior to woman, and that therefore the family and society as well were divinely ordained to be masculine.

The conventional family was, therefore, masculine and authoritarian in its structure and government. The father was its most important member; he decided everything concerning money, occupation, worship, and amusement for the whole family, even though he subdivided his authority for practical purposes. The oldest son, the heir, was next in importance; as a child he was looked upon with deference by all other members of the family, and as a maturing man he began to share power of control with his father. The next in importance were the other sons, who would one day be heads of their own separate households; they were inferior in rank to the oldest son, however, and the families which they later formed were subservient to the family of the oldest son. Next in importance was the mother, whose special functions were the production of children, the management of the household under her husband's direction, the early education of her children, and the contribution of refinement to the home by the practice of the womanly virtues. Next in importance were the daughters whose purpose it was to model themselves upon the pattern of their mother so that they could leave home as the brides of men to whom they would henceforth be subservient. Servants of long standing were often considered as part of the family—as a sort of family property. Of the servants, one of

the most important and worst treated was the governess.

Each family belonged as a unit to a family-in-large, the head of which was the oldest first son—the oldest heir. As a member of the family-in-large, each member family was expected to maintain dignity. It was expected to observe the requirements of the Church; the father read prayers daily, and the family occupied a church pew on Sundays. It was expected to preserve *respectability* by living at its proper caste level, by being financially solvent, by avoiding sexual immorality, by pursuing conventional intellectual goals, and by taking part in social life.

Consequently the education of children was one of the most important functions of the conventional family. First, under a governess in the home, boys and girls were educated together. Later, they were educated separately. The boys were put under tutors who prepared them for Public Schools and the Universities; the girls either continued with the governess until their marriage days, or were sent to fashionable girls' schools. The objectives were to make girls socially attractive and marriageable, and to give boys *connections* with persons of their own and superior ranks in life.

Most of the novels were critical of family life in a very conservative way; they accepted the philosophy and form of the conventional family, and attacked what they considered abuses of authority. They did either of two things: they showed the inevitable tragedy that visited a family in which the conventional order had become in some respect disrupted; or they showed how happiness and prosperity came to a family which managed to make itself conventional. These conservative criticisms showed belief in the order; they criticized abuses—in other words, they inveighed against unkindness, unwisdom, or intolerance in the exercise of authority. Specifically they blamed unkindness, unwisdom, or intolerance for disputes over inheritance; for social misconduct; for mercenary marriages, forced marriages, false marriages, runaway marriages, and marriages below class; for family irreligiousness; for abuses in education; for profligacy, pride, wasteful-

ness, and other domestic vices. And with these criticisms in the novels, the reviewers and the treatise writers agreed. These were the criticisms popularly accepted; these were the criticisms which Charles Dickens eloquently made.

Although few in number and not emphatically expressed, there were some Early Victorian criticisms which attacked the order of the family itself, or parts of the order. Most important among these were the attacks sporadically made upon the restrictions and limitations of woman's sphere, socially, intellectually, and legally. Although they did not argue for the equality of men and women, they did plead for various degrees of emancipation of women.

Non-fiction like Caroline Norton's *English Laws for Women,* and Harriet Martineau's *Society in America,* and novels like Lady Bulwer's *Cheveley,* and Mrs. Gaskell's *Ruth* deplored the facts that woman could own nothing, earn nothing, do nothing in her own name because she was the possession of her husband and was subject entirely to his will. Various novels by Thackeray and the Brontës denounced the injustice done to women as intellectual and individual beings in society; they tried to teach, or at least imply, that women were capable of being characters, of performing actions, of understanding human ideas and emotions just as well as were men.

A second kind of radical criticism was made of some aspects of the education of children. Particularly in Thackeray, Dickens, Anne Brontë, and Bulwer-Lytton the philosophy of the Public School as a training ground for boys was assailed; and, conversely, the lack of philosophy in the education of girls. The criticisms were directed mainly against the snobbishness of the typical family, and the snobbish ends which it sought to serve in the education of its children.

A third radical criticism, rather less frequently made, decried the despotic power of Society over the individual in the family. This denunciation of the power of Convention found most of its expression in the works of the Brontës, Thackeray, Mrs. Gaskell, and Lord Lytton.

Radical criticisms provoked reactionary counter-criti-

cisms. Particularly were the criticisms of the restrictions and limitations of women offensive to the conservative. The reviewers and critics, generally conventional persons, immediately came to the defense of Convention. Their attitude was generally one of sweet condescension; they announced that they were sympathetic with women for many wrongs perpetrated against them. But they denied that these wrongs were to be righted by a change in law or Convention. Reform, they declared, could come only by teaching those in rightful authority (men) to be kind and benevolent. For, they asserted, no sensible person could logically contend that woman was man's equal, or that she had been intended by God to be man's equal. Hence, they pitied Lady Bulwer, but declared that *Cheveley,* for the sake of decency, should not have been written. They condemned the author of *Jane Eyre* for allowing her heroine to rebel, for allowing her to take initiative against man's admitted injustice towards her. They tried to placate woman by assigning to her a *sphere* in life, and by making that artificial and closely limited sphere seem attractive to her. They tried to make her glory in being man's ennobling servant; they eulogized the sickeningly traitorous essays by some of her own sex, works like Mrs. Ellis's *The Wives of England.*

To understand the importance of the criticisms, conservative or radical, one must understand something of the popularity and reputation of the novel itself as a literary form. Suddenly in the 1830's, the novel became popular, many times as popular as it had been during the flowering of the Waverley novels; and it remained popular throughout the period. Lending libraries did a tremendous business; all England read. Hence, the fate of the novel passed into the hands of the publishers, the booksellers, and the proprietors of lending libraries. These men, interested in profit, not in art, gave the public what it wanted; and what the public wanted was a novel of domestic life, somewhat melodramatic, and quite sentimental. The result was that there were produced each year scores of novels whose plots consisted of trite domestic problems and conventional solutions. These novels were gen-

erally uncritical. Of course, they had to show conflict in order to develop plot; but the conflict very rarely implied any criticism of the typical family, of the conventional order.

The reviewers and critics were faced with a problem. How should they criticize the popular novel? They compromised by dealing with it in two ways. On the one hand, they deplored it because it was trivial—because it was a far cry from the works of Jane Austen and of Sir Walter Scott, great works which were easily remembered. On the other hand, they tried to criticize it as a new kind of literature with a validity all its own. Requiring that it be neither unconventional nor unrealistic in manner or matter, they applauded it if it amused or diverted. In general, they too, like other Early Victorians, were satisfied with the institution of the family as it was; they, too, were willing to extol the conventional order.

There were some writers, however, in the Early Victorian period, who, although conventional in most respects, were individual enough upon occasion to attack some conventional beliefs or doctrines. Furthermore, some of them were good writers, and were likely to influence their readers. The critics felt themselves obligated to warn the public against these authors, or at least against the unconventional ideas expressed in their writings. The result was that writers like the Brontës, Thackeray, and Mrs. Gaskell met an initial resistance to the popularity which they inevitably were to enjoy. Thackeray was attacked for his excessive satire, the Brontës for their coarseness, and Mrs. Gaskell for her discussion of indelicate subjects.

In general, the Early Victorian was proud of the typical family, and he resisted criticisms of it, or of the system which had generated it. He readily enough agreed that the novelist should be a critic of life; he was completely willing that the novelist should attack profligacy, tyranny, unkindness, and other vices to which authoritarianism is liable. He wanted to teach the despot who ruled the conventional family to be wise, understanding, and benevolent. But he did not want the

despotic power curtailed; he approved of the authoritarian structure of the family.

Although the Early Victorian was willing that abuses within the family order be criticized, he was unwilling that any part of the order itself be attacked. He had little cause for alarm, however, for the attacks made upon any aspects of the form, function, and philosophy of the family were both few and timid. Only one question may be said to have received much critical attention: the question of woman's subjugation in Society. The battle fought over this issue for the time being was won by the conservatives.

It would be interesting to speculate what might have been the reasons that radical criticisms of family life were so few and so timid as they were in the period, especially when hundreds of books dealing with family life were being put into the hands of an avid reading public, and when also for the first time in more than a century there was a queen on the throne of England. Was Early Victorian England so convinced of its own perfection that it could not be broad-minded towards new ideas, so that instead of broad-mindedness it could at best substitute smug patience and condescension? Had the doctrine of Utilitarianism in some deformed shape been superimposed upon the philosophy of the family? In other words, were the people convinced that the God-ordained system had been given pragmatic sanction and was therefore *all the more right?* Were the feeble efforts of the few radical critics of female subjugation rendered almost dry by the heated counter-criticisms made by women themselves, women particularly like Mrs. Ellis? Was the power which the popular novel placed into the hands of the publishers and booksellers used consciously to prevent radical criticism? Were the booksellers afraid that Convention would not allow the douce members of the typical family to read anything but conventional literature?

Doubtless each question deserves an affirmative answer, and implies a reason why, in the 1830's, 40's, and the first part of the 50's England suddenly and voraciously began to read

novels of family life, and yet managed to discourage and resist what scant radical criticism was produced. It would be wrong to say that any one of these reasons was the only reason, and it would be impossible to determine precisely their relative importances. But certainly all were significant. Satisfied that its conventional views were divine and utilitarian, Early Victorian England was little given to self-criticism. Prose fiction, largely the property of the publishers and the booksellers, was forced to follow rather than to lead public opinion. Consequently, family life, although the subject of most of the contemporary prose fiction, was little criticized during the Early Victorian period.

VITA

David Kincaid Bruner, the son of Nettie (Kincaid) and Robert Weber Bruner, was born on July 30, 1912, in St. Louis, Missouri. He was educated in the public schools of Maplewood, St. Louis, and University City, Missouri. He was graduated from University City High School in 1929, and from Washington University in St. Louis in 1933. In June, 1934, he received the degree of Master of Arts in English from Washington University, where he remained until June, 1935. Since that time, he has been an assistant in English at the University of Illinois where he has continued his graduate work in English. On June 16, 1939, he married Charlotte Hughes Johnston. He is a member of Phi Beta Kappa (Washington University, 1933), and of the Modern Language Association of America.